

# Adults as examples for children – with *agape* and *phronesis* as aims

If we want to learn something from earlier times, we have to question the concepts that govern our thinking today. The title of my paper contains two antique Greek words, *agape* and *phronesis*. I use these words throughout, also in English citations where the words have been translated as “charity” and “prudence”. Earlier charity and prudence had another and much richer meaning than “humanitarian aid” and “economic carefulness”. Better translations today are “unconditional love” and “practical judgement”. But then we have to use four words instead of two. So it is more precise and practical to use the Greek words.

My paper has an introduction and three points. First, I propose that children need adults who themselves exemplify *agape* and *phronesis*. Second, I say something about the concepts *agape* and *phronesis* as they are defined in *Summa theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas. And third, I sketch how educators could be encouraged to confront themselves with these aims.

## Introduction

A German philosopher of education, who died in 1997, Klaus Mollenhauer (1994, p. 17), contends that the most fundamental educational question is this: “Why do we want to have children?” His answer is thus: I will have children “because I want that the good in my life (even if it may be very little) should continue” (p. 17-18, my transl.)<sup>1</sup>. This statement generates two new questions: First, what in my pattern of life do I wish could also continue in the next generation? Second, are the life forms (“Lebensformen”) I choose to represent and the life I actually present to the child, really good for the child? These questions I think are fundamental for all who “bring up” children. They should first of all ask themselves: What is “up” in “upbringing”? What is the ultimate end, the aim that gives direction to all we do? Is this completely a matter of individual choice, or is there a common answer to the question about what is “up”? In other words: Is there a common good for human beings, an unchosen ground that is prior to all our individual choices?

Instead of arguments I will give an example. It is taken from a Norwegian poet from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, who has a strong name: Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson. He won the Nobel price of literature in 1903. One of his short novels: *En glad gutt*, in English: *A happy boy*, starts with this line: “He was called Eyvind, and he cried when he was born” (Bjørnson, 1896, p. 1). The person, who had the greatest influence on his education, was the schoolmaster. His name was Baard. The scene is a small rural community in Norway around 1850. The school was even smaller than the school described recently in the French documentary film *Être et avoir / To be and to have* (Philibert, 2003), which I warmly recommend!

What influenced Eyvind most during his school years, was the schoolmaster’s life story, “which his mother told him one evening as they sat by the fire. It ran through all his books, underlay every word the schoolmaster said; he felt it in the air of the schoolroom when all was quiet. It filled him with obedience and respect, and gave him a quicker apprehension, as it were, of all that was taught him” (Bjørnson, 1896, p. 20).

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<sup>1</sup> “Warum wollen wir Kinder? ... weil ich will, daß das (vielleicht sehr wenige) Gute in meinem Leben Dauer hat”

The schoolmaster's life story lets us understand why Baard became a teacher. It would take too long to read the story, but let me tell you some of the elements. Baard had a brother, Anders. In their youth "both enlisted ... and were together in the war" (p. 21). They were very good friends. But then their father died, and they had to divide his possessions. Both wanted "a large gold watch which was widely renowned, for it was the only gold watch people in those parts had ever seen" (p. 21). They put their father's possessions up for auction, and after a bitter conflict it was Baard who won the watch. But now they became as strangers to each other, and both were unhappy. After a while, Baard wanted to give the watch to his brother. But the night when he came to do it, he dared not go straight in, and instead he left the watch in the barn, without saying anything. "The next day he heard that the barn had been burned down ... Sparks had probably fallen from the splinter which he had lighted that he might see to hang up the watch" (p. 29). Anders was poor, he started to drink, and when he also got a dangerous illness, his wife asked Baard to come to his brother. They were reconciled, and when Anders died, Baard took his wife and child home with him.

What the brothers had said to each other as Baard sat by the bed made its way out through the walls and the night, and became known to every one in the village, and no one was more highly esteemed than Baard. Every one paid respect to him as they would to one who has had great sorrow and found joy again, or as to one who has been long absent. Baard was comforted by the friendliness which surrounded him, and devoted himself to the service of God. He wanted some occupation, he said, and so the old corporal took to teaching school. What he instilled into the children first and last was love; and he practised it himself, so that the little ones were devoted to him as a playfellow and father all in one.

This, then, was the story of the old schoolmaster, and it took such a hold on Eyvind's mind that it became to him at once a religion and an education. The schoolmaster appeared to him almost a supernatural being, although he sat there so sociably and pretended to scold them. Not to know a lesson for him was impossible, and if he got a smile or a pat on the head after saying it he felt a glow of happiness for a whole day.

It always made the deepest impression on the children when the schoolmaster, before singing, would make a little speech; and at least once every week he used to read them a few verses about brotherly love. When he read the first of these verses there was always a quiver in his voice, although he had read it again and again for twenty or thirty years; it ran thus: (Bjørnson, 1896, p. 33-35)

Love your neighbour, you Christian leal<sup>2</sup>,  
tread him never with iron heel  
though in the dust he's lying.  
Living creatures will celebrate  
love's mild power to recreate  
given the chance of trying.  
(my transl.)

Elsk din neste du kristensjel  
tred ham ikke med jernskodd hel  
ligger han enn i støvet.  
Alt som lever er underlagt  
kjærlighetens gjenskerper  
bliver den bare prøvet.

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<sup>2</sup> To be "leal" means to be "true or genuine"

Perhaps this could be seen as the 19<sup>th</sup> century version of “All you need is love”? (Beatles, 1967). We should give love a chance! “It’s easy”. That was the message from the Beatles on the 25<sup>th</sup> of June 1967, in the first TV program sent around the whole world by satellite. But is it really easy “to learn to be you in time” or always to “be ... where you’re meant to be”, as the Beatles proclaimed in their song?

I suppose that many of us have had the experience that even if we love a person and wish all the best for him or her, we may all the same come to say and do things that are not appropriate and not really good for the other. Our means are not always congenial with our good ends. To clarify how it should be, is the task of practical judgement or *phronesis*. Said in a simple way: *Agape* guides us, *phronesis* enlightens us (Comte- Sponville, 2003, p. 36). Baard lacked both *agape* and *phronesis* when he desired the gold watch more than the friendship with his brother. And when he intended to give the watch to his brother, and caused disaster, he lacked *phronesis*. Baard received forgiveness from his brother. That changed his life. When his neighbours met him with respect and goodwill, he wanted to give something back; wanted to do something good for the community. These aims directed his choices and actions as an educator.

## 1 Adults as examples

A schoolmaster gives formal education. But if we extend the concept of education to include informal education, then all adults living together with children can be seen as educators. Adults contribute to the education of children and youths first of all by the pattern of life they present to them. Education in this sense is not a profession, but rather a condition; it is one of the necessary aspects of human life in any culture. The basic educators are first of all the parents and proxies, but also the leaders, trainers, teachers and tutors of children and youths in both informal and formal settings.

### 1.1 Can we learn to be better examples?

Children learn first of all by the example we give them. In human action and emotion, where experience is important, “examples carry more weight than words” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 211), or as Thomas said it: “magis movent exempla quam verba”<sup>3</sup>. If children live in a community like Emmerdale, receiving daily infusions of “backbiting, gossiping, spreading rumours, splitting up other people’s relationships and verbal bullying” (The Times, 2004, p. 8), we should not be surprised if we see ugly behaviour also among the children.

I suppose that most people know in general what they ought to do. The main problem is to do it in the actual situation. Therefore it is not enough to learn good principles. We must be able to apply and modify the principles in tune with the demands of the situation. The good principles must be integrated in our person, our being; integrated with our own experiences, feelings, habits and character – all our active conditions for perception and choice.

Nobody is perfect, and we may guide the children better by acknowledging problems than by trying to keep a facade. But everybody can correct some faults and improve. It has been said “You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”. But is that true? It is certainly very difficult for adults to change their patterns of action, and abstract arguments do not seem to be very

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<sup>3</sup> “In operationibus enim et passionibus humanis, in quibus experientia plurimum valet, magis movent exempla quam verba.” I have used the “concise translation” by Timothy McDermott (Aquinas, 1989) to get an overview of and a first understanding of *Summa theologiae*.

effective. But also adults can learn from particular examples. It may be an experience that challenges our self-understanding both intellectually and emotionally. And it may be an experience of something beautifully done. The beautiful is in itself something attractive, something we want to imitate. Let me give some examples.

The most powerful examples are near to us, in our neighbourhood. I assume we all have seen how attentive and supportive parents can be when their little child takes its first steps. Examples may also be persons we read about, like Zossima, Alyosha and the twelve boys (Dostoevsky, 1879, V.4, X and Epilogue). It may be persons we experience in fictional film, like the foreigner Malthe in *Skyggen av Emma* (Kragh-Jacobsen, 1988) or the psychologist Sean Maguire in *Good Will Hunting* (van Sant, 1997). It may be persons in documentary films, like the teacher Georges Lopez in *Être et avoir* (Philibert, 2003). And it may be a powerful painting like Rembrandt's *The return of the prodigal son* (Nouwen, 1992).

I hope that it is possible for adults to become better examples for the children, and I see no real alternatives. Children want to “become big”, and they have to imitate the adults that are close to them (Mollenhauer, 1994, p. 18). Their weakness is our challenge.

## **1.2 What should be our aims?**

Children need adults who love them, even when the children are unable to give anything in return. Furthermore, as adults we should be able to make wise judgements concerning what is good for the children. Such aims are what Alasdair MacIntyre (1999, p. 5) has called “the virtues of dependent rational animals” – a set of virtues which help us both to “respond to vulnerability and disability”, and to act rationally.

Many virtues are important in our relation with children, for instance, justice, honesty, humility, generosity, humour, patience. We surely need all these virtues and many others. *Phronesis*, however, is necessary in order to perceive a situation correctly, and to activate the other virtues appropriately in the situation. Therefore *phronesis* has a key position among the virtues. *Agape*, however, encompasses and transcends all the virtues. Joseph Pieper (1959, p. 58), writing from a Catholic point of view, contends that “[*Phronesis*] is the mould of the moral virtues; but [*agape*] moulds even [*phronesis*] itself” (Pieper, 1959, p. 58). A similar understanding is held from an Atheist point of view by the French philosopher André Comte-Sponville (2001, p. 266-270, 281).

## **2 Agape and phronesis**

*Agape* is a basic concept in the Christian tradition. *Phronesis* has a key position in the Aristotelian tradition. The concepts are very rich, and in my studies so far I have only had time to scrape the surface of them. But I hope that something true and good (it must be both!) comes out of my project.

*Phronesis* has got much attention within philosophy of education after Joseph Dunne's *Back to the rough ground* (1993). It is mentioned as a promising concept for “education in character and virtue” by McLaughlin & Halstead (1999). And in one of the latest numbers of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Wilfred Carr (2004, p. 70) underlines that it is necessary for the philosophy of education as a whole to learn something from the concept *phronesis* and the Aristotelian tradition of practical philosophy. The combination of *phronesis* with *agape*, however, is not common in educational contexts. My main source is Thomas

Aquinas's *Summa theologiae*, from around 1370. It is here, as far as I know, we may find the first explicit discussion of the relation between the concepts *agape* and *phronesis*.

*Summa theologiae* is a big work. The Blackfriars edition, which is supposed to be the best complete edition so far, is organised in 60 volumes. Though the work is big, its basic idea is simple: All creatures come from God and should return to God (Aertsen, 1993, p. 16 and 31). It has three main parts. The first is about God and the creation. The second describes the movement back to God through morality and virtues. And the third (unfinished) part is “about Christ, who, in being a man, is the way for us who are directed towards God” (I 2 Pr., my translation)<sup>4</sup>.

This sounds very theological, and it is indeed a *Summa theologiae*. The audience he addressed was members of the Dominican order, Christians devoted to the service of God, who should learn to preach and teach and give moral guidance (Boyle, 2002, p. 1; MacIntyre, 1998, p. 105). So, can this be interesting today, when many, at least many philosophers, seem to be Agnostics or Atheists? Today we are used to drawing a sharp line between theology and philosophy. Thomas challenges this division (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 98). Of course theology and philosophy ask different questions, but one question is common. Both ask the question about how we ought to live. And if some answers to this are better founded than other ones, should not these “truths” be common to both theology and philosophy?

Thomas studied Aristotelian and Platonic traditions, but he studied even more the Bible and the Church Fathers. His hermeneutics is directed towards clarification of the true meaning of what he is reading. He approaches a text with his own inner light, and is open to be corrected by the light revealed in the text (Aertsen, 1993, p. 17; Pinckaers, 2002, p. 27). According to MacIntyre his achievement was an “an integration of Aristotelianism into Christianity” complementing and correcting Aristotle on important points (MacIntyre, 1998, p. 99 and 102). An example is his discussion of the concepts *agape* and *phronesis*. My presentation here touches very briefly only a few of the questions that Thomas discusses.

## 2.1 What is *agape* and *phronesis*?

### 2.1.1 Key virtues to human happiness

Both Aristotle and Thomas describe our ultimate aim as a happy life. By definition the good life is something attractive. For Aristotle this is a life where we realise our natural possibilities. The good life requires co-operation between our ability to strive for the attainment of the good, and our reasoning ability to judge what is good – a judgement that is improved through the use of memory, experience and our language abilities. When our desire and our thinking co-operates in the best way, we have moral excellence or virtue. It is not the

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<sup>4</sup> “de Christo, qui, secundum quod homo, via est nobis tendendi in Deum”. The main parts of *Summa theologiae* are here referred to in parenthesis by Roman numbers. The second part is divided in two: I-II and II-II. The subsequent Arabic numeral refers to a Question number. In the text, (I 2) means First part of *Summa theologiae*, Question 2. Each Question has a short introduction, a *Prooemium* (Pr.), with an overview of the subquestions or Articles that it contains. Each Article starts with some arguments (for example: arg. 1), why something seems or seems not to be so and so. Then comes a short counter-argument, *sed contra* (s. c.), and the *corpus* (co.) of Thomas Aquinas's own opinion, his Reply. At last he gives specific answers (for example: ad 1) to the opening arguments. So the reference (II-II 47,1 ad 3) is to the second part of the Second Part, Question 47, Article 1 *ad* the third argument. The Latin text edited by Enrique Alarcón is available online on <http://www.unav.es/filosofia/alarcon/amicis/ctopera.html> (scroll down in Opera majores to *Summa theologiae*). An English edition by the Benziger Bros., 1947, Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, is available on <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/home.html>

thinking as opposed to our bodily desires (like in Platonian and Kantian traditions). It is not the thinking as an instrument for our desires (like in Utilitarian traditions and by Dewey); it is a co-operation between thinking and desire. Thomas cites Aristotle's definition in the *Nicomachean ethics* (NE): "every virtue causes its possessors to be in a good state [*hexis*] and to perform their functions well" (NE 1006a16, Irwin)<sup>5</sup>. This is the situation when we are in balance. We feel and do neither too much nor too little (according to our individual inclinations). Thereby we are able to attend to the unique nuances of each situation, and to follow the reason that persons with *phronesis*, persons we admire, would have given (NE 1007a1).

*Phronesis* directs our actions towards "the common end of all human life" (II-II 47,2 ad 1 Benziger Bros.)<sup>6</sup> – the good both for ourselves and our community. It "is right reason in actions to be done" (II-II 55,3 co.)<sup>7</sup>. It is an intellectual virtue, which presupposes moral virtue. Or said more strongly, "It is at once a virtue of mind and a virtue of character" (Gilby, 1974, p. xiv, with reference to I-II 57,4 and 65,1 and 66,3&4). So *phronesis* binds all the virtues together. Joseph Dunne contends that *phronesis* "is not just one virtue among others but is rather a necessary ingredient in all the others" (Dunne, 1999, p. 49).

As an intellectual virtue it "learns from the past and present about the future; this is the special office of reason, since it involves a process of comparison" (II-II 47,1 co.)<sup>8</sup>. In a drawing by Comenius (1659) *phronesis* is represented as a woman with two faces, reflecting on the past and foreseeing the future. She compares what she has done with what remains to be done, determines a good end in the future and finds good means (both effective and morally good means) to the end. She watches also the present opportunity, the flying *kairos*. It easily slips away if it is not caught there and then. *Phronesis* connects general rules and particular situations, both in the slow discursive deliberation before choosing an action (when that is possible), and in the swift aesthetic seeing of the nuances in the situation, awakening just those feelings, virtues and rules which are appropriate to the realities of the unique situation.

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<sup>5</sup> "virtus est quæ bonum facit habentem, et opus ejus bonum reddit" (II-II 47,4 co.)

<sup>6</sup> " In genere humanorum actuum causa altissima est finis communis toti vitæ humanæ, et hunc finem intendit prudentia."

<sup>7</sup> "prudentia est *recta ratio agibilium*"

<sup>8</sup> "Cognoscere autem futura ex praesentibus vel preaeteritis, quod pertinet ad prudentiam, proprie rationis est, quia hoc per quamdam collationem agitur"

## Prudence.

## Prudentia.



Prudence, 1.  
looketh upon all things  
as a Serpent, 2.  
and doeth,  
speaketh, or thinketh  
nothing in vain.  
She looks backward, 3  
as into a looking glass, 4  
to things past;  
and seeth before her, 5.  
as with a Perspective-  
glass, 7.  
things to come,  
or the end, 6.  
and so she perceiveth

Prudentia, 1.  
omnia circumspēctat,  
ut *Serpens*, 2.  
nihilq; agit,  
loquitur, & cogitat  
in cassum.  
*Respicit*, 3.  
tanquam in *Speculum*, 4  
ad *Præterita*;  
& *prospicit*, 5.  
tanquam *Telescopio*, 7.  
*Futura*.  
vel *Finem*: 6.  
ita, ita perspicit,  
what

what she hath done,  
and what remaineth to  
be done.

She proposeth an  
Honest,  
Profitable, done,  
and withal, if it may be  
a pleasant End  
to her actions.

Having foreseen  
the End,  
she looketh out Means,  
as a Way, 8.

It leadeth to the end;  
but such as are certain  
and easie, and fewer  
rather than more,  
lest any thing should  
hinder. (tunity, 9.

She watcheth Oppor-  
(which having  
a bushy forehead, 10.  
& being bald-pated, 11.  
and moreover having  
wings, 12.  
doth quickly slip away)  
and catcheth it.

She goeth  
on her way warily,  
for fear she should  
stumble or go amiss,

quid egerit,  
& quid agendum re-  
stet.

Actionibus suis  
præfigit *Scopum*,  
*Honestum*,  
*Utilem*,  
simulq; si fieri potest,  
*ſucundum*.

*Fine* prospecto,  
dispicit  
*Media*,  
ceu *Viam*, 8.  
quæ ducit ad *Finem*,  
sed certa & facilia,  
pauciora potius  
quàm plura:  
ne quid impediatur.

*Occasioni* 9.  
(quæ,  
*Fronte capillata*, 10  
sed *Vertice calva*, 11  
adhuc *alata*, 12  
facile elabitur)  
attendit,  
eamque captat.  
In via pergit  
cautè (providè)  
ne impingat  
aut aberrat.

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*Phronesis* “is ‘seeing’ in the here and now where the noble (*kalon*)<sup>9</sup> actually lies and so also where the mean [between excess and deficiency] lies, whether this be the mean in one’s own affairs, one’s family’s, or the city’s” (Simpson, 1997). It is a key virtue to human happiness both for the individual, for our life in the family and for our life in the community we belong to.

However, both Thomas and many of the pagan philosophers in the Antiquity were searching for something higher; a happiness that transcends the happiness that *phronesis* can give us. We have all a “natural desire for survival”, and “whereas the senses are aware only of here-and-now existence, minds grasp existence as such ... and as a result ... desire to live for ever” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 110-111). Human beings strive towards the divine. This was the teaching of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. God is the prime mover of all and the source of all goodness. Even Aristotle seems to think that human happiness ultimately is to become as divine as possible (NE X 7).

Thomas follows this thinking, but transforms it within a Christian context. He trusts the witness of the prophets and apostles in the Bible. God is the ultimate end of human beings and

<sup>9</sup> to *kalon* may also be translated by “the beautiful”. Joe Sachs (2002, p. xxi-xxv) gives good arguments for this translation.

all other things. ... man and other rational creatures attain the ultimate end by “coming to know God and love him” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 174)<sup>10</sup>. Our “natural resources ... are enough to gain ... virtue and the partial happiness that follows virtue in this life; but not man’s nor any creature’s natural resources are enough to gain for him ultimate happiness” (p. 181)<sup>11</sup>.

The movement of the ocean is influenced both by the properties of the water and the wind and by the position of the oceans under the moon. Human action is influenced both by our own capacities and surroundings and our position in the universe under God (p. 326, 331). But God does not force us. “God moves things in keeping with their own way of moving”. Human beings, therefore, God moves “by means of their own free choice” (p. 318)<sup>12</sup>. The human situation is that we have lost “the original subjection of will to God” (p. 266). By the exercise of our free choice we have lost “freedom from guilt and unhappiness” (p. 129). We are like Baard and Anders striving for the gold watch – we have lost the harmony both within ourselves and in our relation to others.

Thomas Aquinas locates *agape* in our will (*voluntas*) together with the other moral virtues. But while reason is the rule for the ordinary virtues, *agape* “goes beyond reason” (II-II 24,1 ad 2)<sup>13</sup>, it “is beyond the resource of nature” (II-II 24,2 co)<sup>14</sup>. We naturally tend to love the good things we see<sup>15</sup>. “For us to love him [God] above all things ... it is necessary that [*agape*] be infused into our hearts” (II-II 24,2 ad 2)<sup>16</sup>.

Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the concepts *agape* and *phronesis* is based on a worldview where God is the centre of the universe and all that happens in it. His basic criterion for judgement of any action is therefore: does it unite me with God or not? All other criteria come in addition. *Agape* “directs the acts of all the other virtues to our final end”<sup>17</sup> – it “supports and nourishes all the other virtues”<sup>18</sup> and “is called the mother of the other virtues”, because it “conceives their acts by charging them with life.”<sup>19</sup> (II-II 23,8). A person with *agape* “habitually directs his whole heart to God, so that he neither thinks nor wills anything contrary to and incompatible with divine love” (II-II 24,8 co)<sup>20</sup>. Directed towards the final end, our ultimate happiness, all the moral virtues are integrated by *phronesis*, and *phronesis* further integrated by *agape*, into a consistent, ordered unity.

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<sup>10</sup> “Deus est ultimus finis hominis et omnium aliarum rerum. ... homo et aliae rationales creaturae consequuntur ultimum finem cognoscendo et amando Deum” (I-II 1,8 co.)

<sup>11</sup> “nec homo, nec aliqua creatura, potest consequi beatitudinem ultimam per sua naturalia” (I-II 5,5 co.).

<sup>12</sup> “Deus autem movet omnia secundum modum uniuscuiusque, sicut in naturalibus videmus quod aliter moventur ab ipso gravia et aliter levia, propter diversam naturam utriusque. Unde et homines ad iustitiam movet secundum conditionem naturae humanae. Homo autem secundum propriam naturam habet quod sit liberi arbitrii.” (I-II 113,3 co.)

<sup>13</sup> “excedit regulam rationis humanæ”

<sup>14</sup> “caritas facultatem naturæ excedit”

<sup>15</sup> “propter inclinationem affectus nostri ad visibilia bona” (II-II 24,2 ad 2).

<sup>16</sup> “Unde oportet quod ad Deum hoc modo maxime diligendum nostris cordibus caritas infundatur”

<sup>17</sup> “per caritatem ordinantur actus omnium aliarum virtutum ad ultimum finem.”

<sup>18</sup> “sustentantur et nutriuntur omnes aliae virtutes”

<sup>19</sup> “dicitur mater aliarum virtutum ... concipit actus aliarum virtutum, imperando ipsos.”

<sup>20</sup> “habitualiter aliquis totum cor suum ponat in Deo, ita scilicet quod nihil cogitet vel velit quod sit divinae dilectioni contrarium.”

### 2.1.2 Friendship with God

Aristotle differentiates between a love of desire and a love of friendship. With the love of desire we love “good things so willed to ourselves”. With the love of friendship “we love those we will good things to” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 349). Friendship is not a virtue when it is sought primarily for pleasure or profit. Friendship is a virtue when it is based on the virtue and worth of the friends. Such friendship Thomas Aquinas calls *amicitia honesti*, “friendship for worth” – an honourable and virtuous friendship (II-II 23,1 arg. 3). Friends have a mutual appreciation of each other and are goodwilled towards each other – they love the “loveable” (*to phileton*) (NE 1155b18-39) in the other person. “Christian love, though not entirely incompatible with friendship, is in itself neither preferential nor reciprocal” (Meilaender, 1981, p. 53). *Agape*, “is based not on men’s virtue but on God’s goodness” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 350). God’s *agape* “is not merited and cannot be earned ... it does not threaten to withdraw if the beloved changes. The beloved is free, free to accept this love or even to choose ends that are hostile to it” (Ventimiglia, 2002, p. 10).

Thomas Aquinas expands the concept of friendship to “anyone connected with” the friend. God is the creator of all and loves all; therefore “the friendship of [*agape*]”, in Latin *amicitia caritatis*, extends both to enemies and “sinners” (II-II 23,1 ad 2 and 3), whom we ordinarily would not choose as our friends. “God is the principal object of [*agape*] and it is for his sake we love our neighbour” (II-II 23,5 ad 1, my transl.)<sup>21</sup>. If you love God, you should also love yourself, love your own body, and love those who live close to you – even the troublesome ones – with the same love as God loves all (II-II 25, 4-6 and 8). When this love is active, it “rules out every motive for sinning” (II-II 24, 11 ad 4)<sup>22</sup>.

*Agape* is not primarily a feeling, but something we do and are prepared for doing. It is to include all, also our enemies, in our prayers and “be prepared ... to help them in their time of need” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 356)<sup>23</sup>. We should be ready in spirit to do good to anyone “as the occasion arises” (p. 361)<sup>24</sup>. The main criterion is that someone close to us needs our help.

## 2.2 Inner and outer harmony

The fruits of *agape* are inner and outer harmony – joy, peace, compassion, kindness, caring for others, education of others.

Peace is twofold, both internal harmony (integrity), “a bringing of all one’s own desires to an ordered unity” (II-II 29,3 co.)<sup>25</sup>, and external harmony, “making us want to fulfil our fellowman’s will as if it were our own” (360). *Agape* manifests itself outwardly in compassion and kindness. Kindness is to do good things to others, being beneficent and hospitable (361). Compassion is to regard the others’ distress “as our own” (360). The Latin word *miser cordia* comes from “one’s heart being miserable (*miserum cor*) (II-II 30,1 co). Giving alms is an act of compassion. We feel miserable too, when others lack what they need. ‘Almsgiving’ was a wider concept earlier than it is today. There is a language connection between “alms” and the Greek word *eleos*. *Eleos* means compassion or mercy (In German: Barmherzigkeit). It was *eleos* that the Good Samaritan practised when he helped the man

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<sup>21</sup> “Deus est principale objectum caritatis, proximum autem ex caritate diligitur propter Deum.”

<sup>22</sup> “caritas, secundum rationem sui actus, excludit omne motivum ad peccandum.”

<sup>23</sup> “secundum preparationem animi, ut scilicet subveniatur eis in articulo necessitatis” (II-II 25,9 co.).

<sup>24</sup> “si tempus adesset” (II-II 31,2 ad 1).

<sup>25</sup> “duplex unio est de ratione pacis, ... quarum una est secundum ordinationem propriorum appetituum in unum”

who had been robbed (Luke 10:37). Thomas divides between needs of the body and needs of the soul. Bodily needs are met by “feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving hospitality to strangers, visiting the sick, ransoming prisoners, and burying the dead.” Spiritual needs are met by “instructing the ignorant, giving advice to those in doubt, consoling the sorrowful, reproving sinners, forgiving offences, putting up with people who are burdensome and hard to get on with, and finally praying for all” (II-II 32,2 arg. 1). Many of these actions are relevant in connection with our upbringing of children!

But in all the works of *agape*, we have to calculate our way of doing them: Thomas says, “As to whom first to help ... the prudent man must make his own judgement” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 361). And the “circumstances must be observed” (364). The judgement of the occasion and the circumstances is a function of *phronesis*. *Agape* guides, *phronesis* enlightens. *Agape* must be supplemented with *phronesis*.

### **2.3 Do we really need agape?**

*Agape* seems not to be necessary. “The moral virtues that dispose us to act well in relation to naturally attainable goals can be acquired by human activity without need of [*agape*] (and are by many pagans)” (Aquinas, 1989, p. 243).

So is it only for the attaining of eternal life that we need *agape*? Or does *agape* make difference also in this life?

An analogy may clarify how *agape* as “friendship with God” affects the human possibilities. Some “people who were once in the cold, freezing to death, ... have been transferred into a warm room”. It takes time to become completely warm, and damage from the freezing condition may persist, but a “decisive event has occurred” (Thiselton, 2000, p. 99, with reference to Whiteley, *Theology of St. Paul*).

Friendship with God means that the ordinary “living together” is supplied with an internal dimension. Thomas describes it as a life with two sides. “One is outward according to the world of body and senses ... The other is inward, according to the life of mind and spirit; it is here that we have intercourse [*conversatio*] with God and the angels” (II-II 23,1 ad 1)<sup>26</sup>. Being warm in the “inner room” we get energy and strength to do good in the cold “outside”. God’s love ... has a tendency to transform the sinner into someone who is ... capable of loving others” (Ventimiglia, 2002, p. 10). This is what happened with Baard.

I think *agape* makes a difference in practice because it transcends the moral calculation of benefits and disadvantages; it does more than ordinary *phronesis*. Where one’s own good is concerned, *agape* “will foster a riskier strategy ... than a stipulation about proportionate convenience mandates” (Outka, 1992, p. 19).

But is it necessary to be religious to do the works of *agape*? Comte- Sponville (2003, p. 283-86) develops “a nonreligious reading” of the metaphor of the seed which has to die if it shall bear fruit (John 12:24). My egoistic self has to die if I shall be free from the tyranny of my egoism and injustice. *Agape* is “a love that is freed of the ego and that frees us from it”. It is “a universal love, without preference or choice, a dilection without predilection, a love without limits and even devoid of egoistical or affective justifications” (Comte- Sponville,

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<sup>26</sup> “Una quidem exterior secundum naturam sensibilem et corporalem ... Alia autem est vita hominis spiritualis secundum mentem, et secundum hanc vitam est nobis conversatio et cum Deo et cum angelis, in praesenti quidem statu imperfecte”

2003, p. 284 and 286). The problem here, of course, is that having the highest ideals is not the same as realising them.

Perhaps the story about the Good Samaritan can help us with the question. The story contains a critique of religious people, and does not focus on the religion or conviction of its hero. The Levite and the priest belonged to the religious elite of Israel. The Samaritans knew the Biblical tradition, but the audience listening to Jesus viewed them as outcasts. Jesus neither comments on the religion of the Samaritan nor on how he had acquired his good personal qualities. It is the compassion and the good action that matters.

The membership in a group (religious or not religious), does not make the difference. But I assume that the basic conviction of a person is important for the person's actions. Is it possible to abstract what a person does from her or his basic conviction? Perhaps to some extent, but the motivating source of the actions is interesting. When we experience something that is beautifully done by a person, we risk becoming interested also in the beliefs of that person. And the more we get acquainted with a person, the more the whole person will challenge us, either to imitation or rejection.

### **3 Encouragement to self-confrontation**

How could adults be encouraged to become better examples for the children close to them? Four elements seem to me to be important for such encouragement: Meaning, time, examples and support. We need meaningful challenges that are related to our own future. We need plenty of time set aside if we shall become involved in existential questions. We need good examples to imitate and bad ones to avoid. And we need support – persons around us who are attentive and supportive (Mollenhauer, 1996, chapter 3).

#### **3.1 Local educational dialogue groups**

In my own parish close to Bergen in Norway I want to initiate a network of small groups consisting of parents and other adults. The first invitation could go to parents who want their child to be baptised in the local church, especially to those who have become parents for the first time. Having a newborn baby in your arms, you want to do all the best for the child, so probably new parents will be motivated for this challenge. But all adults in a neighbourhood – Christians and Non-Christians, married and unmarried, young and old – could be challenged to see their responsibility for the children living close to them. The groups should be open to include all adults who want to and dare to be confronted with the aims of unconditional love and practical judgement. And the participants should support each other. They should help each other with the upbringing of the children and set aside time for dialogue with each other – a dialogue concerning how they ought to live together with the children. After a while, the participants in each group should be encouraged to form new groups, closer to their own neighbourhood. A possible name for such groups could perhaps be Local Educational Dialogue Groups? The many questions concerning organisation of groups, group processes and content to be studied, have to be deliberated locally.

#### **3.2 Planning process in 2005**

I want to pursue my philosophical studies in 2004-2005, and to start the planning of the group activity in 2005. The aims of *agape* and *phronesis* will be important both in the planning process and later. Both the form and content of the planning and the group activity should

express these aims. The first problem is to select art works that may be good starting points for dialogue. Such art works may be movies, paintings, music, poems, novels and other expressive texts – artworks which can give the participants recognition of actual situations involving the older and the younger generation, models to imitate or reject and challenges related to the aims. When an artwork meets a person both emotionally and intellectually, it may open the situation in the group for sharing and judgement of specific experiences and specific questions related to the upbringing of the children. But the common study of a specific artwork will take away pressure on the participants to reveal private details.

“Magis movent exempla quam verba”. Pestalozzi (1995) exemplify that the most efficient is not the usual top-down reforms, but a bottom-up process of small corrections and improvements – starting in homes and spreading to the neighbourhood – aiming at the good for the local community and the whole society.

Adults are examples for children. Parents and others close to children should be better examples. Nothing less than the best co-operation between our being and thinking is necessary.

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